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ABSTRACT

Results of a survey conducted among the membership of the New York State United Teachers identifies causes of stress among teachers. Discipline problems and working with incompetent or unsympathetic administrators are reported as the two salient stress-producing factors. Differences in level of stress are found between urban, suburban, and rural teachers, as well as between varying age groups of teachers. (LH)

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# Information Bulletin

NYSUT TEACHER STRESS SURVEY

1979

November 1979

In May 1979, New York State United Teachers sent a questionnaire to a sample of its membership aimed at identifying the causes of stress among teachers. Some of the major findings are shown below:

- Teachers report the two most stress-producing factors in schools today are Managing "Disruptive" Children and Incompetent Administrators - Lack of Administrative Support.
- Urban elementary and urban high school teachers report higher stress than any other respondent groups in the study.
- Urban teachers report over three times more items as stressful than do rural teachers, and almost twice as many items as suburban teachers.
- The 31 to 40 year old teachers appear to be under greatest stress, with the 41 to 50 year old teachers reporting only half as many items as stressful, and teachers over 50 reporting even fewer items.

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NYSUT TEACHER STRESS SURVEY

1979

In May 1979, New York State United Teachers sent a questionnaire to a sample of its membership aimed at identifying the causes of stress among teachers.

The survey was undertaken for several reasons: (1) NYSUT is often called upon by the media, the Legislature, the State Education Department and others to comment upon what is happening to teachers in the school; (2) there has been a growing interest in teacher stress through media reports on vandalism and discipline problems; (3) NYSUT wanted to identify those situations which are most stressful to teachers in order to plan and implement programs which address these tensions.

Teachers were asked to indicate on a scale of one to five, with 1 indicating lowest stress and 5 indicating highest stress, the relative degree of stress caused by each of 47 events. The events ranged from such items as lack of supplies and inservice training to assault and theft in the schools. NYSUT analyzed the ten items whose average rating were 3.0 or above and represented high stress situations. (Table 1)

It was found that the highest stress-producing factor reported by teachers is that of Managing "Disruptive" Children. This item averaged highest in stress for all but one group of teachers, regardless of age, sex, marital status, level of school taught, or type of district. (Urban high school teachers rated it as the second most stressful item.)

The second most stressful factor reported by teachers was Incompetent Administrators. (This is the item that averaged highest in stress for the urban high school teachers.) Following that, the items that averaged as most stressful were:

Maintaining Self-Control When Angry

Overcrowded Classrooms

First Week of School

Disagreeing with Supervisor

Dealing with Community Racial Issues

Preparing for a Strike

Target of Verbal Abuse by Students

Theft and Destruction of Teacher Property

The data were analyzed by several variables, including type of district (rural, suburban, urban) and teaching level of respondent (elementary, middle/junior high, high school). (Table 2)

It was found that the teachers reporting the highest stress are in the urban elementary schools. Managing "Disruptive" Children was rated as more stressful by these teachers than any other respondent group in the study:

| | Elementary | Middle/Jr. High | High School |
|---|---|---|---|
| Rural | 3.7 | 3.8 | 3.7 |
| Suburban | 3.9 | 4.0 | 3.7 |
| Urban | 4.2 | 4.0 | 4.0 |

As expected, the urban area elementary and high school teachers reported higher stress than their rural or suburban counterparts, with Managing "Disruptive" Children and Incompetent Administrators always leading the list. These urban teachers report over three times more items as stressful than do the rural teachers, and almost twice as many items as suburban teachers.

Number of Items Reported as Stressful
by Various Respondent Groups

| | Elementary | Middle/Jr. High | High School |
|---|---|---|---|
| Rural | 5 | 9 | 6 |
| Suburban | 9 | 12 | 11 |
| Urban | 18 | 16 | 19 |

When the questionnaire responses were analyzed in relation to age of the teachers, it was found that all age groups were remarkably consistent in reporting Managing "Disruptive" Children as most stressful. It is interesting to note that when teachers reach 40 they are less likely to find Incompetent Administrators as stressful, and teachers over 50 even less so.

Item: Managing "Disruptive" Children:

| Age | Average Rating of Item |
|---|---|
| Below 31 | 3.9 |
| 31-40 | 3.9 |
| 41-50 | 3.9 |
| Over 50 | 3.9 |

Item: Incompetent Administrators:

| Age | Average Rating of Item |
|---|---|
| Below 31 | 3.8 |
| 31-40 | 3.8 |
| 41-50 | 3.6 |
| Over 50 | 3.3 |

The analysis by age generated other interesting comparisons. The age group under greatest stress appears to be the 31 to 40 year old population (13 items reported as stressful). The 41 to 50 year old teachers reported almost half as many stressful items (7) and teachers over 50 reported even fewer items (5).

Regardless of the age, however, the top two items did not change--they remained Managing "Disruptive" Children and Incompetent Administrators. (Table 3)

The third higoest stress item, Maintaining Self-Control When Angry, was considered equally stressful by all age groups and by both men and women, but urban elementary teachers view this item as more stressful than do the rural or suburban elementary teachers.

There were few differences in the items reported as most stressful by men and women. Men did report considerably more stress from Verbal Abuse by Students and stress associated with Theft or Destruction of Teacher Property. These items also correlate with middle school and high school teachers reporting more verbal abuse and theft, which can probably be explained by the fact that there are more male teachers in the upper grades than in the lower grades.

Women reported the First Week of School as a stressful item and also reported that Disagreeing with a Supervisor created stress. These data correlate with the findings that elementary teachers in all types of districts reported these items as more stressful to them than did middle or high school teachers.

Teachers who work in school buildings with large enrollments report more stress than those in buildings with small enrollments. Overcrowded Classroom is reported as stressful by urban elementary and urban high schools, i.e., those schools which generally have large enrollments. Theft and Destruction of Teacher Property also appears as a stressful item primarily in urban schools (and to some extent in suburban schools); it generally becomes a more serious problem the higher the grade level.

When teachers were asked if they experienced any illnesses related to the stress they felt in the classroom, 41% indicated symptoms ranging from headache, stomach problems, fatigue and high blood pressure to anxiety, tension, depression and insomnia.

Teachers were also asked how they dealt with their stress. The largest number of respondents discuss the situation with their colleagues, friends, spouses or parents. Another large group reported that they "do the best" they can in dealing with the situation. Other responses range from trying to reach the students, exercising or pursuing hobbies to complaining, crying and doing nothing.

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NEW YORK STATE UNITED TEACHERS
TEACHER STRESS SURVEY
1979

Table 1

| Value | Item |
|---|---|
| 3.9 | Managing "disruptive" children |
| 3.7 | Incompetent administrators - Lack of administrative support |
| 3.3 | Maintaining self-control when angry |
| 3.2 | Overcrowded classroom |
| 3.1 | First week of school |
| 3.1 | Disagreeing with supervisor |
| 3.1 | Dealing with community racial issues |
| 3.1 | Preparing for a strike |
| 3.0 | Target of verbal abuse by student |
| 3.0 | Theft and destruction of teacher property |
| 2.9 | Lack of recognition of achievement |
| 2.9 | Reorganization of classes or program |
| 2.9 | Contract violations |
| 2.8 | Change in duties/work responsibilities |
| 2.8 | Board of Education establishes curriculum goals without teacher consultation |
| 2.8 | Negative attitude toward school by community |
| 2.8 | Lack of availability of supervisory help |
| 2.8 | Insufficient time for planning and preparation |
| 2.7 | Supervising student behavior outside the classroom |
| 2.7 | Staff position excessing |
| 2.6 | Lack of availability of books, materials and supplies |
| 2.6 | Seeking principal's intervention in a discipline matter |
| 2.6 | Maintaining student personnel and achievement records |
| 2.6 | Classroom evaluations |
| 2.5 | Conference with principal/supervisor |
| 2.5 | Threatened with personal injury |
| 2.5 | Disagreeing with other teachers |
| 2.4 | Notification of unsatisfactory performance |
| 2.4 | Being involuntarily transferred |
| 2.4 | Talking to parents about their child's problems |
| 2.4 | Teaching students who are "below average" in achievement level |
| 2.4 | Denial of promotion or advancement |
| 2.3 | Colleague assaulted in school |
| 2.2 | Teacher-parent conferences |
| 2.1 | Evaluating student performance or giving grades |
| 2.1 | Lack of personal facilities (faculty dining rooms, parking, telephone) |
| 1.9 | Developing and completing daily lesson plans |
| 1.8 | Taking additional course work (for promotion) |
| 1.7 | Required attendance at in-service meetings |
| 1.7 | Lavatory facilities for teachers are not clean or comfortable |
| 1.5 | Teaching physically or mentally handicapped children |
| 1.4 | No transfer privileges |
| 1.4 | Having a research or training program from "outside" in the school |
| 1.4 | Dealing with student racial issues |
| 1.1 | Dealing with students whose primary language is not English |
| 1.0 | Dealing with staff racial issues |
| 0.8 | Students dropping course |

NYSUT TEACHER STRESS SURVEY

Table 2

Managing "Disruptive" Children (Average rating = 4.0)

| | Elementary | Middle/Jr. High | High School |
|---|---|---|---|
| Rural | 3.7 | 3.8 | 3.7 |
| Suburban | 3.9 | 4.0 | 3.7 |
| Urban | 4.2 | 4.0 | 4.0 |

Incompetent Administrators (Average rating = 3.7)

| | Elementary | Middle/Jr. High | High School |
|---|---|---|---|
| Rural | 3.4 | 3.7 | 3.6 |
| Suburban | 3.5 | 3.8 | 3.8 |
| Urban | 3.8 | 3.8 | 3.9 |

Maintaining Self-Control When Angry (Average rating = 3.3)

| | Elementary | Middle/Jr. High | High School |
|---|---|---|---|
| Rural | 3.0 | 3.2 | 3.4 |
| Suburban | 3.1 | 3.3 | 3.2 |
| Urban | 3.5 | 3.5 | 3.3 |

Overcrowded Classroom (Average rating = 3.2)

| | Elementary | Middle/Jr. High | High School |
|---|---|---|---|
| Rural | 2.9 | 3.1 | 2.8 |
| Suburban | 2.9 | 3.2 | 3.1 |
| Urban | 3.7 | 3.4 | 3.7 |

First Week of the School Year (Average rating = 3.1)

| | Elementary | Middle/Jr. High | High School |
|---|---|---|---|
| Rural | 3.3 | 2.7 | 3.0 |
| Suburban | 3.3 | 2.9 | 3.0 |
| Urban | 3.3 | 2.8 | 3.1 |

Preparing for a Strike (Average rating = 3.1)

| | Elementary | Middle/Jr. High | High School |
|---|---|---|---|
| Rural | 2.6 | 2.2 | 2.3 |
| Suburban | 3.3 | 3.3 | 3.2 |
| Urban | 3.1 | 3.1 | 3.1 |

Dealing with Community Racial Issues (Average rating = 3.1)

| | Elementary | Middle/Jr. High | High School |
|---|---|---|---|
| Rural | 2.6 | 2.2 | 2.3 |
| Suburban | 3.3 | 3.3 | 3.2 |
| Urban | 3.1 | 3.1 | 3.1 |

Disagreeing with Supervisor (Average rating = 3.1)

| | Elementary | Middle/Jr. High | High School |
|---|---|---|---|
| Rural | 3.2 | 2.8 | 2.9 |
| Suburban | 3.1 | 3.0 | 2.9 |
| Urban | 3.4 | 2.9 | 3.0 |

Target of Verbal Abuse by Students (Average rating = 3.0)

| | Elementary | Middle/Jr. High | High School |
|---|---|---|---|
| Rural | 2.1 | 3.1 | 2.9 |
| Suburban | 2.2 | 3.3 | 3.4 |
| Urban | 3.2 | 3.5 | 3.5 |

Theft and Destruction of Teacher Property (Average rating = 3.0)

| | Elementary | Middle/Jr. High | High School |
|---|---|---|---|
| Rural | 1.8 | 2.8 | 2.9 |
| Suburban | 2.1 | 3.2 | 3.8 |
| Urban | 3.3 | 3.6 | 3.7 |

NYSUT TEACHER STRESS SURVEY

AVERAGE RATINGS OF ITEMS
REPORTED AS STRESSFUL BY VARIOUS AGE GROUPS

Table 3

| | |
|---|---|
| **Age: Below 31** | |
| 3.9 | Managing "Disruptive" Children |
| 3.8 | Incompetent Administrators |
| 3.3 | Maintaining Self-Control When Angry |
| 3.2 | The First Week of the School Year |
| 3.2 | Overcrowded Classroom |
| 3.1 | Disagreeing with Supervisor |
| 3.0 | Reorganization of Classes or Program |
| 3.0 | Target of Verbal Abuse by Student |
| 3.0 | Lack of Recognition of Achievement |
| 3.0 | Theft and Destruction of Teacher Property |
| **Age: 31 - 40** | |
| 3.9 | Managing "Disruptive" Children |
| 3.8 | Incompetent Administrators |
| 3.5 | Overcrowded Classroom |
| 3.3 | Maintaining Self-Control When Angry |
| 3.2 | Dealing with Community Racial Issues |
| 3.2 | Target of Verbal Abuse by Student |
| 3.2 | Theft and Destruction of Teacher Property |
| 3.1 | The First Week of the School Year |
| 3.1 | Disagreeing with Supervisor |
| 3.0 | Reorganization of Classes or Program |
| 3.0 | Negative Attitude Towards School by Community |
| 3.0 | Contract Violations |
| 3.0 | Lack of Recognition of Achievement |
| **Age: 41 - 50** | |
| 3.9 | Managing "Disruptive" Children |
| 3.6 | Incompetent Administrators |
| 3.3 | Maintaining Self-Control When Angry |
| 3.2 | Overcrowded Classroom |
| 3.1 | The First Week of the School Year |
| 3.1 | Dealing with Community Racial Issues |
| 3.1 | Disagreeing with Supervisor |
| **Age: Over 50** | |
| 3.9 | Managing "Disruptive" Children |
| 3.3 | Incompetent Administrators |
| 3.2 | Maintaining Self-Control When Angry |
| 3.1 | Preparing for a Strike |
| 3.1 | Dealing with Community Racial Issues |